

Questions raised ahead of The Sussex Archaeological Society's AGM, 2025

Pamela Earl

Any idea when the overgrown sycamores on the Keep mound will be removed and properly maintained, please?

Answer: Thank you for your question. We regularly monitor the vegetation growth on the Keep Mound and do an annual clearance around the base of the keep walls to ensure that growth on the walls is kept to a minimum. At this time there is no immediate risk to stability of the mound due to the sycamore growth. We are currently working on a grounds maintenance plan for the Castle to cover the next five years and the sycamores will be included within that.

Andrew Smyth

What was/is the size of membership of the Society in 2023, 2024 and 2025 respectively?

Answer: As at 31 March 2025 the Society had 1,573 members compared to 1,640 at the same date in 2024 (4% decrease) and 1,783 in 2023 (8% decrease). We are pleased to be retaining such a high % of our membership given the significant sector-wide downturn being experienced by others in membership purchases and visitors. We are particularly pleased to have halved our membership attrition rate in the 2024/25 financial year. With our dedicated Membership Officer and wider Marketing team concentrating on increased recruitment and retention, the position remains increasingly positive going forward.

Vivienne Blandford

What happened to the funds raised from the sale of the Margary Annexe at Anne of Cleves House? What happened to the extensive collections stored there?

Answer: The sale of the building known as the Margary Block was completed in April 2025 at a value of £550,000 adding critical funds to the Society's cash reserves. These funds will help contribute to the maintenance costs of our buildings in line with conditions surveys undertaken, and support the Society's objectives.

Holtye Roman Road: isn't it time this site was covered up to save it from further deterioration and the site, and its problems written up on the website as a non-visitable asset? Or passed over to the Roman road society, if they still want it.

Answer: The section of Roman Road at Holtye is a valued historic property owned and cared for by the Sussex Archaeological Society. We ensure the site is well-managed through annual reviews of its condition and careful control of vegetation, both in terms of access and impingement on the road itself. For this work we are very grateful to our Head Gardener, James Neal and his team of volunteers. Recent work has seen repairs to the stile, brush-cutting along

the footpath and shrub clearance at the road edge as well as maintenance of the road section itself. There is no urgent threat to the road, and the very solid metal surface of its fabric is in fact sealed by 30cm of topsoil. We do however keep its condition under review and can see the case, once more urgent priorities facing the Society are dealt with, to work on a management plan for the site and seek advice from Historic England on its long-term future. We have no immediate plan to sell the site or pass it onto another charity.

Martin Bell

I am deeply concerned about the future of *Sussex Archaeological Collections* which I regard as the flagship of the society's mission. We have an outstanding editor who did a great job of getting annual publication back on timetable after the departure of the previous editor and Covid disruptions. The arrangement was that the editor was paid 1 day a week (as was his predecessor). About 20 months ago that was reduced to 3.5 hours a week to help reduce cash flow; clearly that is insufficient time to edit the journal.

Loss of the journal would lead to huge reputational damage; the society will lose the significant income stream from units which pays for a significant proportion of the journal costs. I, and dozens, perhaps hundreds, of members will be forced to make the very painful decision about whether we should continue to support the society. Can the Trustees give a clear and unequivocal assurance that they are fully committed to the long-term future of the journal and the restoration of the 1 day a week agreement?

We hear and fully appreciate there are concerns regarding the publication of SAC. These concerns are understandable given the delay in the production of Volume 162, a delay which came on top of a schedule that necessarily slipped by a year during the Covid pandemic.

Council recognises that the Sussex Archaeological Collections sits at the core of our history and charitable aims. It continues to play a powerful and impactful part in archaeological and heritage research in the county. We realise that for many members it is one of the core reasons they support the Society and, for the wider national heritage community, one of our most visible and impactful achievements.

We absolutely understand it must be worrying and frustrating to hear that our valued Editor was placed on reduced hours and that production of our next volume (162 for 2024) was temporarily on hold, but hope members understand this decision was not taken lightly. It came as part of a wide-ranging package of measures which involved restructuring of the organisation, in a reduction of hours for other key staff and in the redundancy and loss of others. Coming off the back of the unplanned departure of our last Editor and the impact of the pandemic it has undoubtedly put the production of SAC under ongoing stress.

Council realises it could have done more to effectively communicate the situation with Members, contributors and stakeholders but hope that our actions in the past, which include the rapid appointment of the current Editor during the uncertainty of the pandemic, the support of the digitisation project of past issues of SAC and funding for their hosting online, show we will ultimately do what it takes to protect this valuable resource.

We can share positive news. Having achieved the sale of the building known as the Margary Block and made the financial progress reported on in the Trustees report, we found ourselves able to uplift the Editor's hours to ensure the completion of Volume 162. We fully anticipate it will be with Members either just before Christmas or early in the New Year.

Our Vice Chair, Matt Pope, will be working with the Editor and the Editorial Board over the next few months to look at building a financially resilient model for the publication and agreeing a timeline with Council on the production of Volume 163 for 2025, and beyond, one which aims to get SAC back on track. They will be looking at cost savings, including synergies with the production of other county journals and workable online options, without compromising the high editorial and production values we value in SAC.

We can give an unequivocal assurance that Trustees are committed to the long-term future of SAC and are in no doubt as to its importance at the heart of our Society. We value everyone's membership hugely and we hope you can see, that despite the delays, the contribution you make to our charity's work continues to support this much treasured journal.

Steven Cleverly

In an article, '*A Long View: Archaeological societies, their legacy, mission and membership*', published in British Archaeology, Issue 203 (July-August 2025), one of the trustee's documents widespread and recognisable problems and threats faced by both this society, and a number of like heritage organisations.

It reads to me that Matt is proposing county societies, reasonably, should consider their futures '*having to daily consider balancing the wide-ranging expectations of our membership with our responsibilities to staff, collections and properties*' (page 44).

Does SAS agree that '*we need to move the dial from membership of an archaeological society being about the opportunity to dig, or to engage with objects*' (page 45)?

We were delighted that our Vice Chair wrote such an engaging article and had this featured nationally in British Archaeology, he is a recognised figure in public archaeology and often expresses his views on the sector.

The views expressed in any article or published work always remain the views of the author and Trustees do not believe it is their role to comment on individual articles. This would set an unusual precedent that is not considered appropriate nor an efficient use of Society resources to start doing so.

Robin Milner-Gulland

(From 2024) ' Publication of Sussex Past & Present is 'temporally suspended'. May we have it back, please? It was a vital link between the staff and the members, running to over 150 issues. Occasional informational emails have been no substitute.

The suspension of Sussex Past & Present continues and will do so until an affordable operating model can be identified for the sharing of content.

Regular monthly newsletters issued to members by our Marketing & Sales department are for the purpose of keeping members up to date regarding the wide range of Society activities.

Counterculture: what has this organisation done for us, and at what cost? we filled in a long form - thereafter, nothing.

Counterculture were appointed in the autumn of 2023 for a 12-month period, funded entirely by resilience funding from the NLHF. Counterculture ran the entire organisation for a period of several months and critically ensured its survival through a substantial restructure that enabled the Society to continue as a going concern. Without the work undertaken during that period, Trustees would have instead placed the Society into liquidation.

We assume the 'long form' this member refers to, is a questionnaire issued to members in the spring of 2024 by the Marketing Director from Counterculture who was inviting and exploring members views in advance of developing a series of brand guidelines for the Society and its constituent properties and activities. These guidelines were subsequently developed and have been in continual use since that time.

Have the Trustees appointed a Librarian? if not, why not, and at what risk?

The Trustees have, on several occasions, attempted to recruit an Honorary Librarian for the Society's library operations located in Lewes. Sadly no one suitable has come forward as willing to be able to commit to this substantial, unpaid role.

We are immensely grateful to the team of dedicated volunteers, led by Emma O'Connor who have been doing an excellent job of enabling the library to remain open for the benefit of members.

Is there a distinction between 'Heritage Properties' and the other places we own?

The Society owns and cares for 11 listed buildings (Grades I, II* and II) on 5 scheduled monuments across Sussex. We refer to these as our heritage properties. Specifically:

Anne of Cleves House
Bull House (currently leased to Thomas Paine Legacy CIC)
Fishbourne Roman Palace
Holtye Roman Road
Lewes Castle
Barbican House Museum
Marlipins Museum
Michelham Priory House & Gardens
The Long Man of Wilmington
The Priest House & Gardens
Wilmington Priory (currently leased to the Landmark Trust)

There are no other properties in the Society's ownership.

Our collections, including three that are designated as nationally significant (Wealden Iron, Sharpe Watercolours and early sheet music) are housed in the six accredited museums which form part of this portfolio.

Most important question: neither finances nor visitor totals seem to be going very well. Last year we were told ' Fundraising will be the major focus' in 2025. Well, one can hold out the begging-bowl a certain number of times, but the effect will wear off. What's needed is a

drive for more members - at present our membership is under one in a thousand of the population of the counties, which is pathetic. The Society needs, of course, to be properly advertised by leaflets, posters, mentions in local newspapers; the public needs to know it exists, and what it does (not just cream teas at Michelham, which would be better off run by the Landmark Trust anyhow). We ought to examine how Surrey and Kent Arch Socs (almost as old as ours) are apparently flourishing, able to keep in touch with their memberships, support digs etc.

In this context the 'South Downs Series' of books, approvingly mentioned by Martin Bell in his farewell speech, was started largely to 'spread the word' about the Society, drawing on the scholarship of the authors. But there is no mention this year of it; presumably stocks of copies still exist, but it seems no inventory of them has been made, let alone any push to sell them. The final such volume, under preparation at present, drawing on valuable material held in the Society's archives, should be a best seller - assuming an attempt is made to market it!

The member's lengthy final paragraph opens with a statement that they ask an important question, yet we cannot find a direct question noted therein.

It is disappointing this member appears to have such a negative view of the Society's performance and indeed we consider some of their comments highly insulting towards the Society's amazingly dedicated staff team who are working tirelessly to deliver against a significant number of priorities. We are therefore not prepared to let this extremely critical commentary go unchallenged.

The Society's membership and visitor numbers are currently outperforming the national average and we are extremely proud of all the work our marketing and sales teams have been delivering in order to sustain membership and attendance numbers in the current challenging climate.

The member suggests the Surrey and Kent Archaeological Societies are models of implied best practice. The following table sets out comparison data based on the information provided in each of the respective Society's latest annual report and financial statements. We present this information so that members can review the detail and subsequently draw their own conclusions.

	Sussex	Surrey	Kent
Membership 2023	1,640	636	1,190
Membership 2024	1,573 (4% ↓)	604 (5% ↓)	1,146 (3.7% ↓)
Population (county/counties)	1.470m	1.248m	1.639m
% members / county population	0.10%	0.05%	0.07%
Turnover	£1.39m	£133,185	£99,207
Annual Deficit	£122,383	£61,647	£279,905
Turnover earned per member	£883.66	£220.50	£86.57
Deficit per member	£77.80	£102.06	£244.25

The member mentions promotion of the South Downs series of books at last year's AGM yet appears to criticise there being no mention of these books at this year's AGM – a strange point given this year's AGM has not yet taken place.

We are extremely proud of the South Downs series and books are these are presented in prime sales locations at each of the Society's retail locations. They are also made available at our annual conference, the Long Man lecture and at other similar events. We are very grateful to everyone who worked so hard to develop this series and to everyone continuing to promote the books at every opportunity.

Colin Brent

Now that the Margery Block sale has been completed, what is happening with the collections that have been removed? Two major displays including the ironworks haven't been on display for six years now, is there a plan to make them accessible again?

Now that the Margery Block sale has been completed and emptied of collection, we can begin to assess what is currently stored at Anne of Cleves House. There is a long-term plan to identify, catalogue and archive everything so that we can be in a better position to begin to re-display some of the collection. Storage facilities for our collections is an ongoing issue, one that that many cultural institutions face both regionally and nationally. We have begun to lead on wider conversations to collaboratively address this emerging crisis. Until that is resolved the complete reopening of the ironwork gallery is impossible but there are other ways that we can make the collection accessible to those who are interested in it, and these are currently being explored. We have reached out to the Wealden Iron Research Group to see how we can better work together to resolve this. If anyone wishes to study a particular item for research purposes we can, of course, facilitate that access.

David Dunkin

My question simply is why does the Sussex Archaeological Society, with its long tradition of heritage and excavation, seem to be reluctant to promote or organise archaeological fieldwork in recent times? There are many reasons that can be cited for this but the credibility of the organisation I believe is severely hampered by this. At a time of financial difficulties it is probable that the society could enrol many more members, particularly younger people, if there was an active program of research and hands-on archaeology.

The Sussex Archaeological Society has, historically, undertaken excavations, but perhaps not as many as people might think.

It last ran excavations in the 1990s through to 2018 at sites including Fishbourne, Clays Hill, Bishopstone and Tide Mills, and Members appreciated the opportunity to participate in digs in under the direction of SAS staff, members and successive Research Officers. While popular as interesting activities for our members to participate in, some were undertaken without ensuring that proper funding was in place for their archiving, analysis and publication.

This was an irresponsible situation to allow to arise, and one the Society must accept historic responsibility for. It is an uncomfortable legacy that falls upon the shoulders of a new generation of staff and Trustees. Our last Research Officer, the much-missed Luke Barber, was tasked in 2010 with producing a future research plan for the Society which included consideration of future excavation projects by the Society. It was his recommendation that the Society should not engage in any further excavation except where proper funding was in place. This would ensure we could cover post-excavation tasks for any project as well as the excavation itself. This was sensible, professional advice and, for the following three reasons as well as others, our position is still the same.

1. Archaeological excavation is a destructive activity and until the moment a site is properly published and its archive properly deposited, that destructive impact is not mitigated in any acceptable way. Unfortunately, in Sussex, we have an extensive and rather shameful list of sites which remain unpublished, archives which remain undeposited and finds which have yet to be reported on. This list includes hillforts, many Roman villas, early prehistoric sites, late prehistoric enclosures and medieval sites. Some individuals have many such unpublished sites to their name, and we wait to see if they will use the time they have to bring them to publication. In some cases, the lead excavators have moved away, changed jobs or sadly died and left no one to pick up the task of publication. The Sussex Archaeological Society will not knowingly add to this list.

2. UK archaeology is currently in a storage crisis. The millions of artefacts and substantial archives from contract archaeology often have nowhere to go as many museums are at capacity and long term, secure, accessible alternatives are hard to find. In addition, there is a substantial quantity of archives currently being stored by individuals in sheds, cupboards, paid storage facilities and barns. Responsible archaeological organisations would only continue to excavate, or consider excavating a new site once their legacy storage issues have been addressed. The Sussex Archaeological Society is working to consider its own storage issues in partnership with other heritage bodies in the County, and is committed to being part of the solution to this issue. We will not contribute further to the crisis.

3. Sussex is blessed with many local archaeological Societies and other organisations who are running excavations and offering opportunities to excavate, some of these are very responsible and professional in their approach. We continue to share such opportunities through our comms channels and provide a supportive framework for responsible fieldwork activities by curating archaeological archives, providing archaeological conservation laboratories, hosting two Finds Liaison Officers, publishing SAC, curating excavated material and sharing best practise and expertise. The Sussex Archaeological Society will support, where it can, responsible excavation in the County.

Should the above situation change, and we have discharged our publication backlog, solved the storage situation and have funds in the bank to underwrite the excavation, analysis and publication of a site for which there is a clear reason for excavation, we may review our position. Right now, we want to be clear, be in no doubt, we will not be running excavations, and we make absolutely no apology for that.

Oliver Gilkes

1. There is still no news concerning the appointment of a librarian for the Society's fine collection of books. This is really an indispensable resource for the members and many others in Sussex. Please can we have a solid update on how recruitment is proceeding? Related to this is the question of Ann Winsor's substantial bequest, specifically for the library. Can we have assurances that this will indeed be used to enhance access and content rather than (sic) being directed elsewhere?

1a. The Trustees have, on several occasions, attempted to recruit an Honorary Librarian for the Society's library operations located in Lewes. Sadly no one suitable has come forward as willing to be able to commit to this substantial, unpaid role.

We are immensely grateful to the team of dedicated volunteers, led by Emma O'Connor who have been doing an excellent job of enabling the library to remain open for the benefit of members.

- 1b. The extremely generous and valuable legacy given to the Society by Ann Winser is restricted in nature and held as part of restricted funds – see Group and Company Balance Sheet and Note 20 within the Society's Annual Report & Financial Statements. By its definition it cannot be directed elsewhere.

2. Can we please have a realistic update on the publications schedule for SAC volumes? We have still to see the appearance of the number scheduled for last December. When will this be issued and how is the volume for this year proceeding? Additionally, what are (sic) the chances of ever seeing Sussex Past and Present (sic) ever making a reappearance, an electronic issue would be fine. All we have at present is marketing publicity.

2. Completion of Volume 162 of the Sussex Archaeological Collections is currently underway and will be issued to those members who have requested it within the next three months. We acknowledge this is still a calendar year behind our usual schedule given the year lost during Covid but we are afraid it is simply impossible currently to find the funds to produce two volumes of SAC in the one financial year – at least whilst the journal is produced in its current form and at its current cost.

We also acknowledge it is far from ideal that the need to obtain cleared funds from the sale of the Margary Block earlier this year delayed the production of the 2024 journal still further.

Trustees categorically remain fully committed to the long-term future of the journal and to finding a more financially efficient and sustainable way of producing it. Future editions will be proceeding once this has been identified.

- 2b. The suspension of Sussex Past & Present continues and will do so until an affordable operating model can be identified for the sharing of content.

Regular monthly newsletters issued to members by our Marketing & Sales department are for the purpose of keeping members up to date regarding the wide range of Society activities.

3. The Society is to be congratulated on the sale of the Margary Annexe. How much was realised from this sale and where is the money going to be directed? We would like to be kept in the loop on this please.

This information has already been made available in detail within the Society's Annual Report & Financial Statements, circulated 7 days in advance of the AGM.

The sale of the building known as the Margary Block was completed in April 2025 at a value of £550,000, adding critical funds to the Society's cash reserves. These funds will help contribute to the maintenance costs of our buildings in line with conditions surveys already undertaken, and to support the Society's wider objectives.

David Rudling

Question 1. Please state the profit or loss of each of the Society's 8 properties to include their full share of central overhead costs.

A detailed breakdown of the financial performance of each of the Society's heritage properties was presented by the Chair of the Finance & General Purposes Committee at last year's AGM. This year's presentation will be following exactly the same format.

Question 2. On page 10 of the Trustees' Report it states that "There will be a continued focus on the Society's engagement with its members". This statement is different from my own experience as a member during the last 5 years, with the lack of the interesting and informative Sussex Past & Present, the reduction in meetings, walks etc for members, a recent reduction in E news updates (other than adverts for general events and requests for donations), the lack of former meetings between SAS Managers/Trustees and members, and no feedback from either of the Membership Surveys. It would be helpful for members to have sight of a written strategic plan and to be informed of senior staff appointments/resignations as they occur. The website could usefully have a list of all senior staff and the trustees, together with portrait photographs of same for recognition purposes.

The member's general comments regarding their membership experience are noted.

Having now completed both the Survive and Sustain elements of our NLHF Strategic Action Plan we are pleased to have moved into the Grow phase. The new Senior Leadership Team will be commencing work this winter on a new strategy for the Society for the period commencing 1 April 2026.

Senior staff appointments are already being announced consistently as they occur.

Staff member resignations may only be announced with the agreement of the staff members themselves. It is not for the Society, nor its membership, to insist that such announcements are made.